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Operational activities for development

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Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit for the consideration of the members of the General Assembly his comments, as well as those of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Fellowships in the United Nations system" (see A/53/154).

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Annex

Comments of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Fellowships in the United Nations system"

I. Introduction

1. The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) report on fellowships in the United Nations system was prepared in response to a request made by the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ) of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) following its consideration of the report of the eleventh biennial meeting of the Senior Fellowships Officers of the United Nations system, held in Paris in September 1994. The meeting reflected system-wide concerns on a number of important issues relating to the fellowship component of the operational activities of the organizations of the United Nations system that include the impact of the move to national execution of projects, the evolving role of the United Nations system in capacity-building and fellowships administration, the cost-effectiveness of related management structures, the harmonization of definitions of fellowships and related statistical reporting.

2. In its request, CCPOQ considered that the JIU report should have the following objectives:

(a) Identification of the contribution made by United Nations system fellowships to capacity-building;

(b) Determination of the optimal modality for fellowship administration and the United Nations system role therein;

(c) Streamlining and possible centralization of certain management structures for fellowships administration;

(d) Development of common terminology and categories for fellowships to facilitate integrated and comparable reporting;

(e) Identification of appropriate United Nations system coordinating mechanisms.

3. JIU participated in the last meeting of the Senior Fellowships Officers of the United Nations system in 1997, when the study was on the agenda of the meeting. Many of the conclusions of that meeting have been reflected in the JIU report and its recommendations. The report reflects the changes of fellowship procedures during the last few years due to the impact of the introduction of national execution of projects and other relevant recent trends in technical cooperation, which have emphasized that recipient Governments have the sole responsibility for the coordination of external assistance and the principal responsibility for its design and management, and that in order to attain the goal of self-reliance in developing countries through the strengthening of national capacities, the operational activities of the United Nations system should emphasize the human dimension of development, in particular through education, training and the development of human resources.

II. General comments

4. The Secretary-General and the organizations of the United Nations system find that the JIU report addresses a subject of direct relevance to the operational activities of the United Nations system. It provides a timely and valuable contribution for the continued efforts of the system in enhancing the delivery of its fellowship activities, which form an essential part of United Nations system training activities and represent a crucial means for national capacity-building. Given the fact that the JIU Inspectors have based their report on a selective sample of fellowship activities and practices in a number of United Nations system organizations, a number of considerations and judgements included in the report may not reflect a system-wide perspective.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

(a) Definition of fellowship: A fellowship in the United Nations system is a specially tailored or selected training activity that provides a monetary grant to a qualified individual or group of qualified individuals for the purpose of fulfilling special learning objectives; such training, which may be of short or long duration and may take place in an appropriate training institution or in the field inside or outside the fellow's country, should be in

response to nationally approved human resources policies and plans, and should aim at impact and relevance for all stakeholders involved;

(b) For reporting purposes, participants in seminars, workshops, technical meetings or conferences should not be classified as "fellows" unless a case can be made that attendance to such training activities form an integral part of a fellowship programme as defined under recommendation 1 (a) above; fellowships entailing payment of a stipend or a daily subsistence allowance (type I) should be reported separately from those awarded under other arrangements (type II);

(c) United Nations system organizations and the Inter-Agency Procurement Services Office (IAPSO) should adopt a uniform format of reporting on fellowships based on an agreed definition and providing reliable data which better reflect the trends in fellowship programmes, in particular the efforts made in compliance with mandates on national execution, gender perspective and technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC);

(d) To stress the excellence attached to United Nations system-sponsored fellowship programmes, consideration should be given within the inter-agency coordination mechanism on fellowships to establishing common standards to be used by each organization for delivering a certificate of excellence to training institutions and meritorious trainees;

(e) United Nations system organizations should maintain and/or update data banks of local or regional expertise, taking into account the contribution made by their fellowship programmes to foster an increased use of such expertise, access to these data banks should be widely open and providers of services to the United Nations system should be encouraged to avail themselves of that expertise.

5. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC generally acknowledge the need for a common definition of fellowships along the lines outlined in recommendation 1 (a), which should facilitate data collection and comparison across the system. However, it should be noted that fellowship schemes, in some instances, are constituted by non-monetary awards, such as "contributions in kind" from Governments or international airfares from agencies, and this should be appropriately reflected in the definition.

6. Also, a definition based essentially on administrative criteria may be too narrow in the light of recent trends in human resource development and the fact that learning is a process which continues much beyond the classroom. Concepts such as on-the-job training, lifelong learning, open and distance learning have been adopted and incorporated in United Nations system training offerings of the International Labour Organization/International Training Centre, at Turin, for example, which registers as participants in its activities not only those attending formal courses at Turin but also those participating in workshops in the field or in distance-learning programmes, as well as those trained in their workplace.

7. Finally, it should be noted that the term "fellow" can be perceived by some to be gender-biased, and consideration should be given to phasing out the use of the term, perhaps in favour of a more neutral term, such as "grantee".

8. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC support recommendation 1 (b) regarding the proposed classification of "fellows" for reporting purposes.

9. With regard to recommendation 1 (c), the Secretary-General and the members of ACC endorse the proposal that the organizations of the United Nations system adopt a uniform format of reporting on fellowships that can better reflect trends in programme development, in particular the efforts made in compliance with mandates on national execution, gender perspective and TCDC.

10. Members of ACC expressed reservations regarding the clarity and appropriateness of recommendation 1 (d). The recommendation concerning the award of a certificate of excellence to training institutions is not generally supported. Such certificates tend to favour well-known institutions to the detriment of other training institutions which although less well known do offer training of a very of good standard. Indeed, such smaller training institutes may offer good quality training programmes at a lower cost.

11. The award of certificates to trainees presupposes the undertaking of a final testing of learning achievements, which carries with it the possibility of not granting the certificate to candidates who fail the test. It may thus prove difficult to apply the proposal across the board. Furthermore, it is doubtful if national authorities and their officials participating in fellowships would accept the notion of having to undergo a test as a prerequisite for the recognition of their successful attendance. On the other hand, a certificate of excellence that is automatically given to all participants, regardless of their learning achievements, is not very credible. The Secretary-General believes that the more normal practice of awarding certificates of attendance to all participants may help to overcome these concerns.

12. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC generally endorse the suggestion included in recommendation 1 (e) to maintain and/or update data banks

of available local and regional expertise, taking into account the contribution made by the fellowship programmes of their organizations. Data banks containing information on selected training institutes are also generally supported. Such data banks are extremely useful, and they could eventually contain indicators of excellence and quality control. At the same time, it is pointed out that the development and maintenance of data banks is rather ambitious. A clear decision would have to be made on who should assume this responsibility.

Recommendation 2

(a) The Secretary-General, in consultation with the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and concerned Member States, should submit to the General Assembly, at its fifty-fourth session, an evaluation report on the implementation of Assembly resolution 50/131 of 20 December 1995 and on the need to maintain the United Nations Educational and Training Programme for Southern Africa (UNETPSA) as a separate programme with an expanded geographical coverage;

(b) The Secretary-General should submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, a report on the training and fellowship programmes carried out by different units in the Secretariat, and should make proposals with a view to enhancing their implementation and promoting better coordination;

(c) The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) should review its fellowships funding policies so as to be able to initiate and sustain a fellowship programme relevant to its mandate.

13. Concerning the call in recommendation 2 (a) to maintain UNETPSA as a separate programme with an expanded geographical coverage, the Secretary-General and the members of ACC do not believe that there is justification in maintaining UNETPSA as a separate programme. They consider that the programme has successfully achieved its goals. Recognizing, however, that the training needs of those formerly served by the programme remain enormous, and in view of the continuing need for capacity-building in the countries formerly served by the programme, it is considered that appropriate earmarking should be considered in the formulation of development assistance frameworks for the countries of southern Africa.

14. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC support the general thrust of recommendation 2 (b), and will submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, as recommended, a report on the training and fellowship programmes. In order to enhance coordination and improve the administration of United Nations fellowships, the establishment of a working group at the Secretariat level to review the fellowship operations of different departments will be considered.

Recommendation 3

(a) To support national execution, organizations should establish data banks of training institutions in their particular field of activities and make them accessible to national administrations involved in the implementation of fellowships, either upon request or online;

(b) Fees negotiated with host institutions by United Nations system organizations should be considered as "United Nations rates" applicable to all system-sponsored fellows, irrespective of the modality of execution;

(c) Fellows under national execution (NEX) should be insured within collective insurance contracts entered into by United Nations system organizations;

(d) Where training takes place abroad, disparities in allowances to trainees placed in the same institution should not exist or should be kept to a minimum, whatever the organization concerned or the modality used for execution;

(e) For countries facing problems of transfer of funds that are involved in national execution of fellowship programmes, arrangements should be made through the resident coordinator system to guarantee payment of fees to host institutions and allowances to fellows;

(f) When using the facilities offered under support cost arrangements for UNDP-supported projects, nominating countries involved in national execution of fellowship programmes are urged to take full advantage of the experience and network of contacts of United Nations system organizations in their respective fields of competence.

15. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC support recommendation 3 (a) on the usefulness of establishing data banks of training institutions. A database on training institutes and potential sources for training could be established on the basis of existing data available in the files of former fellows. This information could be made available on the United Nations Web site, with useful links to the databases of various organizations of the United Nations system. Access to this information would be relatively easy, particularly to United Nations field offices. Regarding access to such data banks by national authorities, it is suggested that such access be provided upon request. In this way, the responsible fellowships unit can guide the local administrations in their search for suitable training institutions.

16. It should be noted that in some instances, comprehensive documentation on training institutions is prepared by the organizations of the United Nations system on the basis of information contained in relevant data banks. ACC members wish to emphasize that in the context of national execution, national authorities fully retain their prerogative to resort to United Nations agencies for placements and administration of fellowships if they so wish. This service, however, has a cost that should be recognized. The approach followed by individual members of the system should be harmonized, and the entitlement and other administrative aspects should be treated in the same manner.

17. Regarding recommendation 3 (b), the Secretary-General and the members of ACC agree that it would be desirable to apply common "United Nations rates" for all United Nations system sponsored-fellows participating, irrespective of the modality of execution, even if in actual practice such fee equality cannot always be achieved.

18. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC support recommendations 3 (c) and 3 (d).

19. The guarantee of the payment of fees to host institutions and allowances to fellows through the resident coordinator system, as suggested in recommendation 3 (e), would require a more direct involvement of United Nations system entities in the implementation of the related fellowship programme.

20. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC support recommendation 3 (f), and would like to clarify that the provision of relevant technical support services to nationally executed and implemented UNDP-funded projects has been specifically envisaged in the relevant support-cost arrangements.

Recommendation 4

(a) Host Governments are urged to provide or continue to provide the necessary support to their national placement and supervising agencies (NPSAs) so that they can extend free services to United Nations system-sponsored fellows; as a matter of policy, organizations should give priority to securing such free services whenever available, due regard being given to cost-effectiveness and quality control;

(b) Future meetings of Senior Fellowship Officers should investigate other possibilities for more cost-effective placements, such as regrouping requests to fewer NPSAs, requesting a particular NPSA to serve as a regional placement agency, pooling of resources, or establishment on a cost-sharing basis of common placement structures funded by participating organizations;

(c) The Secretary-General, in consultation with the Administrator of UNDP and the host country, should report to the General Assembly, at its fifty-fourth session, on the possibility of UNETPSA being given a new mandate to capitalize on its experience and serve as a common system placement and supervising mechanism in southern Africa.

21. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC, while generally supporting recommendation 4 (a), point out that in some instances NPSAs in traditionally important host countries charge handling fees for their services, and this has tended to favour the increased use of direct placement. At the same time, however, it is recognized that some NPSAs offer their services free of charge, and in those instances this can constitute a powerful incentive to use their services.

22. Concerning the call in recommendation 4 (b) for a particular NPSA to serve as a regional placement agency, it should be noted that host countries compete for the implementation of training programmes in their own country. Thus, the proposal for grouping NPSAs could only work in the cases in which the countries concerned do not offer programmes in the same field.

23. Recommendation 4 (c) is closely associated with recommendation 2 (a). As noted in paragraph 13 above in relation to recommendation 2 (a), the Secretary-General and the members of ACC do not believe that it is necessary to call for a new mandate for UNETPSA since the programme has successfully achieved its goals. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC recognize, however, that the training needs of those formerly served by the programme remain enormous, and suggest that the continuation of required training activities be included in the United Nations national assistance programmes and/or frameworks prepared at the country level.

Recommendation 5

(a) Organizations which have not done so should undertake on their own or within a joint exercise with other interested organizations an evaluation of their fellowship programme and report consequently to their legislative organs on ways and means to improve their overall impact, relevance and cost- effectiveness;

(b) Recipient countries are urged to contribute to the fullest extent possible to the implementation of follow-up procedures which can enhance the evaluation of fellowship programmes;

(c) Within the framework of inter-agency coordination on fellowships, evaluation issues and methodologies should be emphasized through sharing of experiences and definition of best practices.

24. ACC members, recognizing that evaluation is an issue of central concern, generally support the thrust of recommendation 5 (a) on the proviso that due attention is paid to the financial cost of evaluation exercises. A number of instruments and mechanisms are already being applied with a view to (a) improving the design of training activities (through staff training and peer reviews); (b) ensuring a systematic analysis and processing of the evaluation of participants; (c) implementing selected institutional impact evaluation exercises by major programmes every year; and (d) activating tracer mechanisms to monitor the work of former participants upon return to their institutions.

25. At the same time, care should be taken to avoid raising expectations too high concerning the possibility of systematically evaluating the impact of an increasingly large number of short duration training programmes, since results are usually manifested in the medium to long term and often depend on a number of variables that are beyond the control of the training process. Furthermore, United Nations system entities, many of whom are facing resource limitations, are bound by decisions of their governing bodies regarding the use of resources.

26. With regard to recommendation 5 (c), the Secretary-General and the members of ACC concur with the suggestion of recommendation on enhanced inter-agency coordination of fellowships and attention to evaluation issues and methodologies. The subject of evaluation will figure as a main topic on the agenda of the next meeting of Senior Fellowship Officers of the United Nations system and host country agencies, scheduled to be held in spring 1999.

Recommendation 6

(a) An inter-agency coordination mechanism on fellowship matters should be maintained and hosted by one of the participating organizations to handle focal point activities; in designating the host organization, due consideration should be given to the need for continuity and to the special responsibilities of the United Nations in coordination issues;

(b) Meetings of Senior Fellowship Officers should continue to serve as the main framework for inter-agency coordination on system-wide issues relating to the management of fellowships, with adequate linkage to the ACC machinery; participation in these meetings and their format should better reflect the increasing trend in the placement of fellows in developing countries; and prior to meetings of Senior Fellowship Officers, consideration should be given to the assessment of fellowships at the regional level with a view to taking full advantage of possibilities offered for the regionalization of placements and in the context of TCDC;

(c) Agencies which have training activities in the same fields should designate a lead agency and harmonize their programmes for better impact and to avoid duplication.

27. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC agree that it is important to continue to maintain an inter-agency coordination mechanism on fellowship matters. It is recalled that the United Nations, represented by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and its predecessors, has taken the lead role in fellowships coordination since 1974, and for the sake of continuity and institutional memory, the Secretary-General and the members of ACC are of the view that the Department should continue to carry out the coordinating function through the next meeting of Senior Fellowship Officers of the United Nations system and host country agencies scheduled for April 1999, when the subject of coordination will be reviewed in depth.

28. The Secretary-General and the members of ACC also agree with recommendation o (b) that the meeting of Senior Fellowship Officers should continue to serve as the main framework for inter-agency coordination, with appropriate linkages to ACC machinery. While also agreeing that it would be important to secure, prior to meetings of Senior Fellowship Officers, the assessment of fellowships at the regional level in the light of the increasing trend in the placement of fellows in developing countries, they consider that resource constraints may not allow for many regional meetings for this purpose. Resorting to the greater use of modern information networking arrangements may be a more viable cost-effective option. Indeed, they further consider that inter-agency cooperation can be enhanced through such suitable networking arrangements, including the establishment of an appropriate Web site, with concomitant needs for appropriate central support.

29. Finally, the Secretary-General and the members of ACC endorse recommendation 6 (c) since its implementation could lead to greater synergy of the efforts of United Nations system organizations in this area, while avoiding duplication.